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ABSTRACT

Preschoolers were taped while individually interacting with each of their parents. Tapes were transcribed and the language forms used by children and parents were counted. These forms included constructions involving the contraction "let's"; colloquial lexical items such as "whatchamacallit"; tag questions such as "You're going, aren't you?"; direct commands; and polite forms. Compared to mothers, fathers used more constructions involving "let's" when speaking to their children. When speaking to their daughters, fathers used more colloquial lexical items and tag questions than did mothers. Regardless of the gender of the parent with whom they were speaking, girls used more direct commands and colloquial lexical items than did boys. Compared to boys, girls asked more questions when speaking to their mothers and more polite forms when speaking to their fathers. A reference list of 12 items is appended. (BC)

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Gender-typed Language in Preschoolers and Their Parents[1] [2]

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Abstract

Preschoolers were taped interacting individually with each of their parents. Regardless of child gender, fathers produced more "let's" constructions. When speaking to daughters, fathers used more lexical items, "let's" constructions, and tag questions than mothers. Mothers and fathers did not differ in gender-typed language when speaking to their sons. Regardless of parent gender, girls used more direct commands and lexical items. To mothers, girls produced more questions and tag questions and to fathers, girls produced more lexical items, polite forms, and direct commands. A careful analysis of contextual factors may be required to better understand gender differences in language.

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The general topic of gender differences in conversation has received a great deal of attention in recent years (Coates, 1986, Berko Gleason, 1989, McCloskey, 1987). Lakoff (1973) provided anecdotal evidence of several differences she had observed in men's and women's speech including women's greater use of hedges (I think), tag questions (You're going home, aren't you?) and men's greater use of direct commands (Shut the door).

Subsequent research has provided only limited support for Lakoff's (1973) original assertions. For example, Crosby & Nyquist (1977) reported greater use of hedges by women while other studies have found no gender differences in the use of hedges (e.g., Crawford & Chaffin, 1987; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988). Similar mixed results have been found for tag questions (Dubois & Crouch, 1975; McMillan, Clifton, & McGrath, 1977).

Berko Gleason has provided evidence that fathers and mothers demonstrate gender differences in the language they use in talking with their sons and daughters. For example, fathers tend to interrupt more (Berko Gleason & Grief, 1983) and use more direct imperatives whereas mothers use more indirect imperatives (Bellinger & Berko Gleason, 1982).

These studies by Berko Gleason and her colleagues are particularly important since it is likely that parents play an important role in their children's acquisition of gender-typed speech. The present study systematically investigated gender-typed language in preschool-age children and their parents. A

second goal was to determine if use of gender-typed language by parents is related to parents' gender identities.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 14 pairs of parents and their preschool-aged children, 7 boys and 7 girls. The children ranged in age from 35 months to 58 months.

Materials

Spence and Helmreich's Personal Attribute Questionnaire (PAQ) scale was used to measure gender identity. Two toys, a set of blocks and a Fisher Price Play Family House, were used for the play sessions.

Procedure

The children were video and audio taped interacting individually for 15 minutes with each of their parents in a laboratory playroom. Following the play sessions, each parent completed the PAQ.

From the audio and video tapes, transcripts were made. Children's and parents' speech were coded for empty adjectives (e.g., adorable, precious), euphemisms (e.g., oh my, my goodness), hedges, direct commands, hints, let's constructions, intensifiers (e.g., so, very), lexical items (e.g.,whatch-a-ma-call-it, thing-a-ma-jig), questions, polite forms, and tag questions.

Results

Parent Language

Mean frequencies of language features used by parents are summarized in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

In analyzing the data on all language feature variables, fathers produced significantly more let's constructions [$t(13)=-2.51$, $p<.026$] than mothers did, regardless of the gender of the child.

Analyzing the language to each child separately, mothers and fathers did not differ significantly in the amounts of these language features produced when speaking to their sons. However, in speaking with their daughters, mothers and fathers did differ on three variables. Fathers used more let's constructions [$t(6)=-2.49$, $p<.04$], lexical items [$t(6)=-2.46$, $p<.04$], and tag questions which approached significance [$t(6)=-2.12$, $p<.07$]. For lexical items and tag questions the mothers and fathers means to boys and girls were compared. For lexical items, moms averaged .29 to their sons and .43 to their daughters, whereas dads averaged .14 to their sons and 1.71 to their daughters. For tag questions, mothers averaged 1.71 to the boys and 2.0 to the girls, whereas fathers averaged 3.0 to the boys and 4.14 to the girls.

Child Language

Mean frequencies of language features used by children are

summarized in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Regardless of the gender of the parent, girls produced significantly more direct commands [$t(12)=2.26$, $p<.04$] and lexical items [$t(12)=2.76$, $p<.01$].

Analyzing the language to each parent separately, boys and girls differed significantly on a number of variables. To mothers, girls produced significantly more questions [$t(12)=2.53$, $p<.02$] and tag questions [$t(12)=2.46$, $p<.03$]. The boys produced no tag questions to their mothers. When speaking to their dads, daughters produced more lexical items [$t(12)=2.97$, $p<.01$] and polite forms [$t(12)=2.50$, $p<.02$]. Also, girls produced more direct commands [$t(12)=2.47$, $p<.03$] than the boys produced. In comparing the means of the boys and girls to their moms and dads, girls produced an average of 12.57 direct commands to mom and 12.86 to dad, whereas the boys produced an average 9.71 direct commands to mom but only 6.57 to dad.

Gender Identity Language

In comparing people with masculine gender identities to people with feminine gender identities on all the variables, only one significant difference was found. Those with masculine gender identities produced more questions [$t(10)=2.31$, $p<.043$].

Discussion

These results clearly indicate that gender-typed language is

present in young preschoolers as well as their parents. However, the findings were not always in the expected direction (e.g., girls produced more direct commands). This supports previous research (e.g., Crosby & Nyquist, 1971; McCloskey, 1987) which indicates that careful analysis of contextual factors may be required in understanding gender differences in speech. Also, it appears that gender role identity may play a minimal role in the production of gender-typed language in this study. Indeed, it is surprising the analysis of parent language according to gender role identity produced only a single difference and this area clearly deserves additional research.

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Table 1

Mean Frequency of Language Features for Parents

CATEGORY	To Boys & Girls		To Boys Only		To Girls Only	
	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers
Direct Commands	5.78	6.57	5.14	3.02	6.43	8.43
Let's Constructions	1.21	2.78*	1.71	2.57	0.71	3.00*
Lexical Items	0.36	0.93	0.28	0.14	0.43	1.71*
Questions	26.36	28.64	28.14	27.86	24.57	29.43
Polite Forms	0.71	0.14	0.71	0.14	2.28	0.57
Tag Questions	1.71	3.00	1.71	3.00	2.00	4.14

*$p < .05$

Table 2

Mean Frequency of Language Features for Children

CATEGORY	To Mothers & Fathers		To Fathers Only		To Mothers Only	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Direct Commands	12.72	8.14	12.86	6.57*	12.57	9.71
Let's Constructions	2.72	0.93*	2.43	1.14	3.00	0.71
Lexical Items	1.86	0.14*	2.86	0.00*	0.86	0.28
Questions	9.57	7.93	7.00	9.57	12.14	6.28*
Polite Forms	0.64	0.14	0.71	0.00*	0.57	0.28
Tag Questions	0.79	0.22	0.28	0.43	1.28	0.00*

*$p < .05$